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Canadian Catholic bishops urge better care of elderly and vulnerable in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic

POSTED BY: KIPLY LUKAN YAWORSKI JULY 17, 2020

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By Brian Dryden, Canadian Catholic News

[Ottawa – CCN] – The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the "heartbreaking" neglect that many elderly Canadians and other vulnerable people have been facing in modern Canadian society, but that exposure can also be an opportunity for Catholics and other Canadians to reassess our "values and lifestyle" in a meaningful way, say Canada's Catholic bishops **in a statement released on July 14**.

"As we slowly return to a more normal way of life, let us not forget the elderly among us who still have so much wisdom to impart, faith to share, stories to tell and joys to offer," the statement by the executive committee of the **Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB)** said.

"Let us create space in our hearts, homes, families and communities to honour them and truly care for them in their weakness and their many needs. Let us welcome their unique giftedness in building a world which is more human, loving, generous, forgiving, and radiant with God's grace," said the pastoral message from the CCCB entitled **"They Still Bring Forth Fruit in Old Age: A Lesson on Caring in the Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic**."

Canada's Catholic bishops noted that the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a massive disruption of everyday life in Canada since March when most public spaces, including churches, were shuttered to the public, has exposed cracks within the social fabric of Canadian society.

The bishops' statement says the global pandemic has caused "great suffering and enormous difficulties" for many vulnerable Canadians, but it is the "horrific" way in which many elderly Canadians, isolated in understaffed and under-resourced long-term care facilities, that is perhaps most disturbing.

Citing Pope Francis' warning about modern "throwaway culture," Canada's bishops say that it is the elderly who are "more often than not the primary victims of this culture of discarding."

According to a study released by the Canadian Institute for Health Information in June, 81 per cent of all COVID-19 deaths in Canada as of May 25, 2020, were in long-term care and nursing home facilities for the elderly.

"That many elderly endured weeks practically in solitude to avoid contracting the virus even from caregivers, and that many died without either the presence of family members or the comfort and strength of the Church's Sacraments and pastoral care is heartbreaking," Canada's bishops said.

"Most upsetting and what has come to light is the admission that this situation already existed long before COVID-19 appeared on the horizon," the bishops said of the level of care that many Canadian seniors have been living with well before the devastation of the pandemic exposed the situation.

But the bishops say there is hope for change if the pandemic serves "as an important reminder of the inherent dignity of human life, its meaning and what should be most important in life."

"The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a renewed discussion about important changes needed in order to address both the present and future challenges facing our elderly who are already frail and compromised by the conditions in which they are forced to live," says the CCCB statement.

"Our hope is that Canadians will gain greater awareness as to how our culture prioritizes the freedom, desires and choice of individuals, and regrettably also tends to neglect the rights and responsibilities that promote the common good of society and the dignity of every person, especially the elderly," say the bishops, adding that the impact of the global pandemic on the vulnerable in Canada "weighs heavily upon the collective conscience of both our country and Church."

The pastoral message from Canada's bishops calls for Canadians and Catholics "to renew our sense of authentic solidarity and community by considering and treating others, especially the most vulnerable, the sick, and the elderly as valued and precious members of our communities."

"May Jesus Christ, the Lord of all mercy and goodness, through the intercession of Mary, Mother of families and Comforter of the afflicted, enlighten, inspire and protect us. May we be graced with a new awareness and appreciation of the gift which the elderly are to us all."

Bishops call on Canadians to learn from pandemic to build a more caring society

By Catholic News Agency staff

[Ottawa – CNA] Canada's bishops have issued a pastoral letter expressing concern for vulnerable persons, especially senior citizens who receive inadequate institutional care, a situation that has been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

"They Still Bring Forth Fruit in Old Age: A Lesson on Caring in the Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic," which bears the date July 1, 2020, was released by the executive committee of the **Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB)** July 14.

In the letter, the bishops recognized the difficulties faced by many elderly persons during the pandemic, especially isolation and neglect. However, they said this pandemic has also provided a valuable lesson on human dignity.

"The pandemic can, in many ways and for many people, serve as an important reminder of the inherent dignity of human life, its meaning and what should be most important in life. No matter the degree of isolation and privation each of us may have experienced so far in this crisis, there are lessons to be learned about the need for courage, determination, hope and steadfastness," the bishops said.

"One of these important lessons, especially for the younger generation, is that well before COVID-19, the elderly and the disabled were frequently excluded or forgotten, not only by society in general, but in many cases by their faith communities and even by their loved ones."

The bishops said the elderly have faced a deficiency of mental and physical health as well as a disregard to their emotional, spiritual, and relational needs. Disturbingly, they said, these situations had existed prior to COVID-19.

"What emerged at the beginning of the pandemic were the conditions in long-term care facilities and similar institutions that were particularly disturbing, as government and healthcare authorities began to acknowledge," they said.

"That many elderly endured weeks practically in solitude to avoid contracting the virus even from caregivers, and that many died without either the presence of family members or the comfort and strength of the Church's Sacraments and pastoral care is heartbreaking."

According to reports by caregivers and military personnel providing military assistance, the bishops said, there have been numerous accounts of neglected bedside care and feeding, unattended hygienic needs, and insufficient living spaces.

They also said the problem is worsened by inadequate staffing, including too few employees, poor training, unsatisfactory compensation, and "many of whom were working in multiple institutions."

They pointed to the words of Pope Francis, who has warned against a "throwaway culture." They said, more often than not, elderly people are discarded. They emphasized the crucial role of the Church to care for the vulnerable, sick, and elderly.

As people have found creative ways to share the burden of the pandemic, the bishops said this troubling time has also been a source of hope and new opportunity. They said it has brought a fresh awareness of society's limitations and perspectives on the needs of humanity.

"Our hope is that Canadians will gain greater awareness as to how our culture prioritizes the freedom, desires and choice of individuals, and regrettably also tends to neglect the rights and responsibilities that promote the common good of society and the dignity of every person, especially the elderly," they said.

"This begins with respecting and protecting, in peace and justice, the fundamental and inalienable rights of each human person, as well as their authentic development and social well-being in the entire community."

Assured of God's presence, Catholics "can move forward in confidence, generosity, gratitude and prudence as our governments and healthcare authorities ease the Coronavirus 'lockdown'," the bishops said. "This will entail reassessing our priorities, taking an honest look at our values and lifestyle. We must let ourselves be challenged by the Lord's calling and the present needs of our brothers and sisters."

"As we slowly return to a more normal way of life, let us not forget the elderly among us who still have so much wisdom to impart, faith to share, stories to tell and joys to offer. Let us create space in our hearts, homes, families and communities to honour them and truly care for them in their weakness and their many needs. Let us welcome their unique giftedness in building a world which is more human, loving, generous, forgiving, and radiant with God's grace."

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